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Article

## Open House? Class-Specific Career Opportunities within German Universities

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### Abstract

This article focuses on the development of class-specific inequalities within German universities. Based on data on the social origin of students, doctoral students, and professors in the long-term cross-section, the article views the empirically observable dynamic of social closure of higher education since the 1950s. The focus of interest is on the level of the professorship. Data show that career conditions for underprivileged groups have deteriorated again. This finding is discussed in the context of social closure theories. The article argues that closure theories consider social closure processes primarily as intentional patterns of action, aimed at a strategic monopolization of participation, and securing social power. Such an analytical approach means that unintended closure processes remain understudied. Our conclusion is that concealed modes of reproduction of social structures ought to be examined and theorized more intensively due to their importance for the elimination of social inequality within universities.

### Keywords

career; Germany; higher education; inequality; social background; social class; university

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

The number of students worldwide has increased massively, especially since the 1970s (Marginson, 2016), yet there has been no significant change in class-specific inequality relations (Wakeling, 2018). This is noteworthy because the educational certificates awarded by universities represent an essential social resource in modern societies; symbolically and legally they are the legitimization for the highly valued and influential professional positions. Therefore, unequal opportunities to access these educational certificates affect one's ability to access the labour market and thus to individual life chances and op-

portunities to participate. As scarce social goods, educational certificates are the subject of social struggles and are tightly connected with power relations. The unequal distribution of educational opportunities concerning social origin leads to an exclusive social make-up, especially in top social positions (Hartmann, 2007).

Following these initial considerations, the article analyses the changes in the socioeconomic profile of students, doctoral candidates, and professors at German universities associated with the expansion of education. These observations are discussed in the context of classical social closure theories. Following the expansion of education in the 1950s, the number of students of low sta-

tus able to participate in higher education has increased significantly over time. However, this only created a very short-term and limited social opening for the higher-status passages, such as doctorates and professorships. This opening did not last, and in subsequent cohorts, it has again given way to social closure.

First, the international state of research on the social origins of professors is examined, followed by consideration of German universities (Section 2). Section 3 discusses the social closure theories with the trend of social closure being illustrated further in Section 4 by a hypothetical cohort analysis. Sections 5 and 6 deal with implicit and possibly unintended closure mechanisms by referencing both qualitative research results, as well as current developments in higher education policy.

## 2. Literature Review

Despite substantial differences between national higher education and academic career systems (for comparative overviews see Enders, 2010), research on class-specific inequalities within universities shows international trends. Inequalities were mainly studied and documented for the transition to higher education, while only limited reliable data and few studies can be found for higher-status passages (Hüther & Krücken, 2018, p. 245; Wakeling, 2018). There are hardly any systematic data on the highest academic profession, the professorship, except for mainly (older) individual studies. Because these studies are based on different methodological concepts, they can only be presented to some extent. For example, there are older studies that refer to different parental occupational groups.

Based on a survey conducted in the mid-1960s, Bourdieu (1988) analysed the social origins of French professors. For this purpose, he differentiated five groups of origin by the father's profession: about 7% of professors had fathers who were farmers or industrial workers, about 26% of the fathers were clerks, craftsmen, primary teachers, or middle management employees, about 27% were engineers, industrialists, or senior managers, 24% officers, magistrates, administrative executives, or worked in liberal professions. Finally, 17% were themselves professors or intellectuals.

Nakhaie and Brym (1999) analysed the social background of Canadian professors using data from a 1987 survey of Canadian faculty members. The authors determined the social background of the respondents through their father's professional position and divided them into four different categories: Almost 10% of the fathers of the professors were farmers, about 20% had semi-skilled or unskilled occupations. Almost 37% of fathers worked in semi-professional and qualified occupations with 34% being from specialist and management positions.

In an early analysis of international data, it can be summarized that most of the professors—especially in

relation to the working population—come from privileged families.

There is a relatively small body of literature concerned with the experiences of professors with a low social background at North American universities (Grimes & Morris, 1997; Haney, 2015; Lee, 2017). Grimes and Morris (1997) conducted a study about US American sociologists from working-class families. Those professors have the feeling of being caught between the world of the family of origin and the academic world, without feeling like belonging to either. Respondents report that their parents' indifference to their college education and their lack of knowledge of how to succeed in a middle-class profession became a problem for them. Haney (2015) shows similar results for the experiences of Canadian professors from working-class backgrounds. They have to work harder and make greater sacrifices for comparable success, as they acquire less cultural capital in their families and usually attend worse schools. Their academic success is accompanied by negative aspects such as the loss of close relationships with family and friends. Lee (2017) studied the direct and indirect stigmatization of US professors due to their low socioeconomic background. The interviewees primarily describe indirect stigma. The meaning of the inequalities they experience is denied or academia is constructed as a classless space. Lee concludes that professors with low SES backgrounds, therefore, must engage in emotion work.

Autobiographies of professors from working-class families can supplement these systematic studies as they provide essential insights into the subjective perception of upward mobility in academia, although they mainly come from the humanities and social sciences. Central themes of the autobiographies can be found in the studies mentioned above: alienation, the lack of cultural capital, and stigmatization (Warnock, 2016). In addition, authors of the autobiographies address their feelings of shame regarding their social backgrounds, the fear of being exposed as a fraud by middle-class peers, as well as the fear of being perceived as arrogant by people from the milieu of origin (Wakeling, 2010). In recent autobiographies, the high financial debt by student loans is emphasized (Warnock, 2016). Bourdieu (2008) and Eribon (2013) theorize their dispositions associated with social ascension with the concept of the divided habitus.

In Germany, the available systematic data on social origin—similar to the international surveys—mainly focus on students. The significantly smaller population of doctoral candidates, whose proportions vary considerably according to discipline, is estimated concerning both the number of doctoral candidates and the number of postgraduate drop-outs (Konsortium BuWiN, 2017). At irregular intervals and without further differentiation, e.g., by discipline, the *Sozialerhebung*<sup>1</sup> shows the social origin of doctoral candidates. So far, no comparable data are available for postdoctoral students and habili-

<sup>1</sup> The *Sozialerhebung* has been conducted since 1951 and collects representative data on the economic and social situation of students in Germany approximately every three years.

tants.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, sociostructural data regarding professorships in Germany has only been gathered through individual surveys (Möller, 2015; for the so-called scientific elite see Graf, 2015; Hartmann, 2013).

Based on the literature review, it can be concluded that the socially privileged composition of scientific career positions is mainly based on large selections during the educational phases leading up to the doctorate (Lörz & Schindler, 2016). Selections are generated during the transition phases in the German school and university system, so that students, and especially doctoral candidates, already form a highly selective group (e.g., Middendorff, Apolinarski, Poskowsky, Kandulla, & Netz, 2013; Lenger, 2008). The probability of obtaining a doctorate increases for students who are already working as student assistants in the higher education system (Schneickert, 2013).

Once the doctorate has been obtained, various studies assume that there are similar career opportunities in science according to social background (Enders & Bornmann, 2001; for the phase of habilitation see Jungbauer-Gans & Gross, 2013). But the assertion of similar opportunities for different social groups after the doctorate must be put into perspective by more differentiated analyses. There are hierarchical status differences within the professorship as well (Hüther & Krücken, 2018, pp. 22–23). For example, among junior professorships, which are often appointed as early career positions shortly after the doctorate and are usually followed by a lifetime professorship (Burkhardt & Nickel, 2015), only very small shares of social climbers from the low (7%) and the middle (7%) group of origin can be identified (Möller, 2015; see also Zimmer, 2018). In the case of non-scheduled professorships<sup>3</sup>, on the other hand, people from the lower group of origin are represented more than twice as often (17%).

Concerning the class-specific chances of obtaining a professorship, major differences can be observed between different disciplines. For example, there is a large gap between socially closed legal and medical subjects and the economic and social sciences (Hartmann, 2002; Möller, 2015), as well as between different time periods (Hartmann, 2002; Möller, 2015; Nagl & Hill, 2010). Studies that reflect a trend in the social profile of origin conclude that it has become more closed in recent decades (Hartmann, 2002; Möller, 2015; Nagl & Hill, 2010).

### 3. Intended or Unintended Social Closure? Theoretical Considerations

Patterns of action aimed at monopolizing and defending privileges, power, influence, prestige, and other social resources are often addressed and analysed in the context of social closure theories. Securing one's position

and resources leads to closure processes in which goods, resources, and opportunities of appropriation or participation of competing groups are (or should be) reduced. As a theory of medium range, closure theories are open and elastic enough to explain different phenomena of inclusion and exclusion (Mackert, 2004). Social inclusions and exclusions are not static, but rather procedural and dynamic. Closure theories are sensitive to such developments and can be used to analyse sociostructural dynamics over longer periods of time (Weber, 1979, p. 43).

Theories and analyses of social closure processes are often related to professions and social inequalities in the labour market (Collins, 1990; Strømme & Hansen, 2017). For Parsons (1966), rationalization in the pursuit of goals, professional knowledge, and a universalistic orientation were still among the typical characteristics of professions. In the 1970s, closure theories developed into an instrument of analysing power relations (Mackert, 2004, p. 17), which were able to examine the strategic monopolization of professional groups, as well as specific asymmetric power relations (Larson, 1977).

Social closure processes are primarily interpreted as intended, i.e., strategic action in competitive situations to achieve one's own goals. Recent research argues in favour of developing a further understanding of social closure by also looking at unintended processes and mechanisms that can lead to closures. When Wilz (2004) examined gender inequalities in professionalization processes, she stated that social closures can also be the result of an unintended action. Even if closures are not anticipated as a result of one's actions, an unintended exclusion represents a *de facto* closure (Wilz, 2004, pp. 228–229).

For a discussion of intended or unintended processes of exclusion, it seems productive to use Bourdieu's theory of social practice. The subjects of his power-critical analyses are often power relations and social segregations in the various fields of society. With the concept of symbolic violence or domination, he grasps those barely comprehensible and subtle mechanisms of exclusion in which not only the excluded but also the exclusionists are involved. However, the exclusionists' involvement is not conscious, but rather takes the form of self-exclusion or tacit submission (e.g., mediated through reverence and shame). Symbolic violence "is the imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (i.e., culture) upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 104).

According to Bourdieu, domination is mediated in symbolic orders and in language, and accordingly above all through educational institutions, as he illustrates within the French educational system (Bourdieu, 1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Unequal educational opportunities are disguised by the assumptions that un-

<sup>2</sup> The phase of habilitation is a specific qualification in the German scientific career between the doctorate and the professorship.

<sup>3</sup> The non-scheduled professorship (*Außerordentliche Professur*) is a title that can be awarded to private lecturers who have habilitated for at least four years and who have distinguished themselves through outstanding achievements in research or teaching (Turner, Weber, & Göbbels-Dreyling, 2011, p. 59). However, the title differs significantly from a normal professorship. It is not accompanied with a comparable position and holds a significantly lower prestige compared to a full professorship (Möller, 2015).

even living conditions are “natural” and unequal constellations of adaptation to cultural requirements in educational institutions can be attributed to individual talents, and not, for example, to the result of different origin-specific resource endowments that affect cultural capital. In this context, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, which works as a mediator between an actor and a field, is of great importance:

The habitus, a system of dispositions acquired by implicit or explicit learning which functions as a system of generative schemes, generates strategies which can be objectively consistent with the objective interest of their authors without having been expressly designed to that end. (Bourdieu, 1995, p. 76)

Therefore, “the principal...strategies [in a field] are not cynical calculation, the conscious pursuit of maximum specific profit, but an unconscious relationship between habitus and a field” (Bourdieu, 1995, p. 76).

Mechanisms of social closure can thus also be understood as a consequence of certain habitual dispositions: as a form of unintended action, which not only has integrating effects but also socially excluding impact in the form of the self-elimination of structurally disadvantaged groups.

#### 4. Empirical Observations: Opening of Access versus Positional Closing

In Germany, the close connection between social background and participation in higher education can be illustrated by time series such as the *Sozialerhebung* (see also Section 2). For a long time, the social origin was determined by four groups of origins, which are subdivided hierarchically according to the prestige of the parents’ professional positions and educational qualifications. The low group of origin primarily gathers students whose parents are, for example, workers or low-skilled employees and civil servants without a university degree. In the middle group of origin, the parents are master craftsmen, foremen as well as employees in mid-level positions, and civil servants without a university degree. The upper group includes, for example, employees and civil servants in upper positions, freelancers, and similar positions with and without a university degree. Finally, the high group of origin includes mainly employees with extensive management tasks, civil servants of higher service, entrepreneurs of larger companies, and similar top professional positions with or (rarely) without a university degree (for a precise explication see Möller, 2015, p. 321).

In the long term, the social origin profile of students is subject to significant fluctuations. These fluctuations are shown below in the participation rate of students from low groups of origin: while in 1956 about 11% of the students came from the low group of origin, by 1985, their

share had risen to 18% (see Table 1). The social opening in the 1980s is attributed to the overall political atmosphere of educational reform and expansion in Germany. Encouraged by education policy measures, the potential of social groups that had not previously been involved in higher education was exploited (Miethe, Soremski, Suderland, Dierckx, & Kleber, 2015).

Table 1 presents the social opening among students and the impending closure at professorial level through a cohort comparison (1–4) of students, doctoral candidates, and professors. The limitation to these qualification passages is because comparable data on the social profile are only available for these (and not, for example, for the passage of the habilitation). Because of the lack of data on the level of students and doctoral candidates, national data from the *Sozialerhebung* were used as these are the only comparable data that allow a historically retrospective cohort analysis.<sup>4</sup> For the professors, a survey at the North Rhine-Westphalian universities from 2010 was used (Möller, 2015). The intervals of the years correspond approximately to the qualification years, which lie between the qualification passages and the (first) appointment to a university professorship. This is a hypothetical cohort analysis because it is assumed that the professors in the respective cohorts were recruited from the corresponding student (and doctoral cohorts).

In the following we will focus on the ratio between the groups “low” and “high” (see ratio low:high, right column of the table), as this reflects the opportunities for a scientific career of the most contrasting population groups. Table 1 shows different developments:

1. For the students, the ratio of the two contrasting groups of low and high origin shows a social opening over time between the first and fourth cohorts (cohort 1: 1:3.9; cohort 4: 1:1.4);
2. In the first and second comparative cohorts, it becomes clear that the composition of the professors is more socially open than that of the students in the comparative cohort (1956): cohort 1: students 1:3.9, professors 1:3.2; cohort 2: students 1:5, professors 1:2.3. Given the enormous expansion of the higher education sector since the 1950s and the associated high demand for university teachers and the associated acceleration of careers (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 135), it appears qualified people from lower social backgrounds have also benefited;
3. This minor social opening in the professorship only lasted for a short period of time and turned into a social closure. On the one hand, the unequal proportions between the low and high groups of origin of professors between the second and fourth comparative cohorts are intensified (cohort 2: 1:2.3; cohort 4: 1:3.8). The closing trend can be seen in two steps: from the 2nd to the 3rd cohort in favour of the upper group of origin and from

<sup>4</sup> Data for doctoral students are not available until the 1980s.

**Table 1.** Cross-sectional comparison between the social origins of students, doctoral candidates, and professors in % (Students: N = 165,800, Postgraduates: N = 1,587; Professors N = 1,313). Source: for the student data: 3rd, 5th, 8th, and 11th Sozialerhebung (Deutsches Studentenwerk, 1957, 1964, 1977, 1986). For the doctoral data: unpublished special evaluation of the 12th and 15th Sozialerhebung. For the data of the professors: survey at North Rhine-Westphalian universities 2010 (Möller, 2015, p. 206).

	Reference groups	Group of origin in %				Total	Ratio Low:High
		Low	Middle	Upper	High		
1	Students 1956 (N = 110,492)	11	35	11	43	100	1:3.9
	Professors 1971–1980 (N = 181)	11	29	25	35	100	1:3.2
2	Students 1963 (N = 21,598)	10	28	12	50	100	1:5
	Professors 1981–1990 (N = 200)	13	28	29	30	100	1:2.3
3	Students 1976 (N = 18,756)	18	23	7 <sup>5</sup>	52	100	1:2.9
	Postgraduates 1988 (N = 880)	13	31	25	31	100	1:2.4
	Professors 1991–2000 (N = 354)	12	27	31	30	100	1:2.5
4	Students 1985 (N = 14,954)	18	31	26	25	100	1:1.4
	Postgraduates 1997 (N = 798)	11	27	24	38	100	1:3.5
	Professors 2001–2010 (N = 578)	10	27	25	38	100	1:3.8

the 3rd to the 4th cohort in favour of the highest group of origin. The data on the social background of postgraduates in Germany (third and fourth cohort) furthermore make it clear that social closure already begins with the doctorate (see also Jakszat & Lörz, 2018). On the other hand, a comparison with the student cohorts shows that the opening of the students between the 3rd and 4th cohorts (cohort 2: 1:5; cohort 4: 1:1.4) is not reflected in the professorship, but rather suggests a social closure among the professors (cohort 3: students 1:2.9, professors: 1:2.5; cohort 4: students 1:1.4, professors: 1:3.8).

In summary, it turns out that the social opening among students has therefore not automatically translated itself into a social opening of the higher levels of qualification. On the contrary, closure processes of the higher qualification levels have followed.

These observations raise the question of how positional closures in the doctoral phase and at the professorship can be explained, given that there has been a social opening at the lower status levels.

### 5. Habitus Difference and Fitting Conflict: Sociopractical Approach to Explaining Closure Processes

Various mechanisms can explain social closures in favour of privileged groups of origin in science. For example, social climbers are more likely to arrange themselves modestly and without a career plan, while people from upper-class backgrounds invest early in networks and self-presentation and are therefore more likely to be successful in the academic field (Lange-Vester & Teiwes-

Kügler, 2013, pp. 188–189). Because of their socialization, people from privileged families often already have a clear “sense of play” at the start of their careers and thus save time and energy not having to adapt to the requirements of the scientific profession as others do (Hasenjürgen, 1996, p. 270). Women from working-class and lower-employee families, for example, often have less scientific capital, but present themselves as marginalized even if they are equally well positioned in the scientific community in terms of jobs, publications, lectures, etc. Therefore, original habitual dispositions often prove to be an obstacle to advancement and “career-making” in the scientific field (Blome, 2017b; Lange-Vester & Teiwes-Kügler, 2013), meaning that a successful rise from disadvantaged backgrounds to high social positions requires far-reaching habitus transformations and great achievements in adaptation (El-Mafaalani, 2012).

This reveals origin-specific habitual dispositions that favour people from higher-status families of origin in the competition for high scientific positions without any obvious, conscious trickery being attributed to them. Bourdieu (1995, p. 76) states that:

When people only have to let their habitus follow its natural bent in order to comply with the imminent necessity of the field and satisfy the demands contained within it (which, in every field, is the very definition of excellence), they are not at all aware of fulfilling a duty, still less of seeking to maximize their (specific) profit. So they enjoy the additional profit of seeing themselves and being seen as totally disinterested.

The above assessment may not be entirely correct for the scientific field and scientific careers. To achieve a high and long-term position, such as a professorship,

<sup>5</sup> The reduced share of the upper group of origin and the increase in the high group is partly due to changes in classifications by academic professions (e.g., engineers and teachers) during this period of the social surveys of students. These problems are not present in the data for the professors.



requires proactive accumulation of scientific capital. In other words, the aim of scientific careers is also to maximize a specific profit. However, at the same time it belongs to the illusion of the field not to pursue science out of self-serving career interests, but out of pure interest in knowledge, and to embody this ideal as a scientific personality (Engler, 2001). The demands of the field and the demonstration of achievement of which Bourdieu speaks can rather represent those people whose origin-specific dispositions are more suitable and who do not have to overcome such great sociocultural distances. Those whose origin-specific dispositions are more in line with the scientific field, and thus do not have to overcome great sociocultural distances, may rather meet the requirements of the field to which Bourdieu refers.

While people from higher backgrounds are more likely to feel well suited to the academic field (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1971, p. 31), feelings of foreignness and distinction can lead to selections and self-elimination within social achievers. Burkart (2007) assumes that feelings of distinction automatically accompany classification fights. It usually is not about a conscious, strategically applied differentiation from others, but about the self-evident fact of belonging or not belonging to a social milieu (Burkart, 2007, p. 164).

Submission and self-exclusion despite high qualifications can therefore only be understood to a limited extent as a voluntary departure from academic careers in the academic field and as a result of selective or rational decisions, but also as an expression of habitus-structural conflicts (Blome, 2017a, p. 325, 2017b; Schmitt, 2010). Therefore, unequal degrees of integration depending on social origin should be understood as habitus-field-fit relations, which do not necessarily or exclusively make closures appear as strategic closures “from above”, i.e., intended by privileged groups, but at least in part because of habitual and pre-reflective social practices that correlate closely with class relations.

Among the possibly unreflected and unintended exclusions are also unconscious prejudices and the phenomenon of homosocial co-optations, i.e., the phenomenon that mentor-mentee relationships and recruitments are often influenced by social similarity. This could also contribute to the fact that especially in socially closed disciplines (e.g., medicine or law) social advancement by those of lower groups hardly occurs due to the high proportion of people from privileged classes (Böning, 2017; Möller, 2015, p. 229).

Social practices are also (re)constituted by field dynamics and field transformations. Thus, changes in higher education policy and the changing conditions for scientific careers also have an impact on closure processes and mechanisms. It is striking that the observed social closure correlates in time with the neoliberal trans-

formation of the university and science system (Münch, 2014), and the increased uncertainty of scientific careers (Laufenberg, 2016; Möller, 2018). Already during Weber’s lifetime, scientific careers were regarded as a hazard (Weber, 1997). But a lack of collateral and precarious contractual careers has increased significantly in the last two to three decades (Funken, Rogge, & Hörlin, 2015; Reuter, Berli, & Tischler, 2016). As Bourdieu (1981, p. 180) pointed out, risky and long-standing career paths are rather avoided by social climbers (Blome, 2017a), but benefit people who bring along adaptable cultural and economic capital.

The debates on elite and excellence, which have also been established with the market- and competition-oriented political control measures of recent decades, and the nationwide excellence initiative and strategy, are being launched to stratify the German higher education landscape vertically. The constructions and rhetoric of excellence and the associated effects of the concentration of resources and prestige (Bloch, Mitterle, Paradeise, & Peter, 2018; Hartmann, 2010; Münch, 2007; Reitz, Graf, & Möller, 2016) should also lead to symbolic and social closure effects.

The junior professorships implemented since the early 2000s also have strong closing effects due to their enormous, socially selective composition (cf. Section 2; Burkhardt & Nickel, 2015; Möller, 2015, p. 238; Zimmer, 2018). These can be traced back to the fact that “fast careers” are more likely to be achieved by privileged people (Hartmann, 2002, p. 70) because they already have the appropriate starting capital and career strategies, while social achievers often have to acquire them. Especially people with uneven biographies and a higher age often associated with this are at a disadvantage (the already low number of professors with a “second chance education”<sup>6</sup> has halved in the last two decades, Möller, 2015, p. 282).

## 6. Access Open to Many: Positions Reserved for a Few?

The exclusion of lower social classes is a complex phenomenon. Habitual fitting problems, phenomena of social subordination and a lack of “sense of play” for the necessary practices in scientific careers are essential for its understanding. Besides, there are open and covert acts of disclosure (e.g., discouragement, informal age limits) that have so far only been studied to a limited extent (Blome, 2017b). Making acts of discrimination and other forms of intended closures transparent seems to be just as necessary for the realization of equal opportunities between social groups as the reflection of unintended closure mechanisms are essential to overcome them.

The observed fluctuations in the proportions of people from low social groups of origin indicate that the pe-

<sup>6</sup> Second chance education in Germany serves the subsequent acquisition of school-leaving qualifications. Initially limited to evening schools and colleges, this was mainly connected with the acquisition of the university entrance qualification. Since the 1970s, the expansion to include evening secondary schools, evening high schools, and elementary schools has given second chance education the task of increasing the general success of school-leaving qualifications (Harney, Koch, & Hochstätter, 2007).

riod of educational expansion, compared with the last two decades, offered more favourable opportunity structures for these groups. In this respect, the degree of inclusion and exclusion from higher positions at the university may also be related to political measures and the changed framework conditions for an academic career. Critical reflection and evaluation of science policy measures seem necessary to understand social closure processes.

Equal opportunities in academic careers concern academia but the importance of the topic goes beyond simple academic interest. The socioeconomic background of the scientific staff influences their research interests as well as their teaching approaches and pedagogical orientations (Lee, 2017). In addition, professors of low social origin can serve as role models for students from disadvantaged families increasing their chances of success (Oldfield, 2010). But in Germany, less than 20% of people with postgraduate degrees remain in higher education (Flöther, 2017). The doctorate tends to go hand in hand with a higher income and higher work satisfaction and is a prerequisite for occupying top positions in many social fields (Konsortium BuWiN, 2017, p. 36). Questions of equal opportunities in achieving a doctorate thus relate to aspects of individual life chances as well as to social power relations.

It is not only in Germany that there is a lack of adequate collection of sociostructural data from academic staff. The belief in a purely meritocratic culture of success in the scientific field continues to conceal social inequalities and to misjudge symbolic rule. In the analysis of social closures, the scientific culture of success, the conditions of habitual-fitting, and the complex changes in scientific careers should be of importance.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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